

Boston Marathon 2007

Getting There

I have followed the Boston Marathon since I was a high school cross-country runner. I know all of the famous champions, the race history and the details of the course. I am a running-nerd. I attended the 2000 Boston Marathon when Karen ran. It was quite the spectacle. I was a supporter, a cheering fan, a bag-toter... I was a *non-qualifier*!

After chasing a qualifying time off and on for nearly 20 years, I finally figured it all out and qualified back in December. It would be my turn to make the 26.2 mile journey from Hopkinton to Boston.

As soon as you touch down in Boston you realize that the city is totally centered on the Marathon. Banners, billboards, local newspaper and tv coverage, and well wishes from strangers on the street make it clear that Boston is the mecca for marathoners. The heart of downtown is swarming with runners from around the world.

What is a Nor'easter?

I learned a great deal about New England weather patterns over the weekend. The long range forecasts had predicted temps ranging from the low 30s to the mid 40s, wind and rain. I packed for a wide range of conditions. When we turned on the local news in the hotel on Friday night it was clear that I should have packed my wetsuit. There was a nor'easter heading in on Sunday and it had already dumped 5+ inches of rain on NYC. They were predicting the worst marathon conditions in 111 years. There was even some speculation that they might cancel the race. A Nor'easter resembles a tropical storm with a circular pattern, an eye and the potential for devastating wind and flood damage. The storm rotates out over the Atlantic Ocean gathering up tremendous amounts of moisture. It then dumps that moisture over New England using 25 – 35 mph winds with 60+ mph gusts. If it is cold enough, that moisture can turn to huge amounts of snow. The storm rotates in a counter clockwise direction so the wind and rain are blown from the northeast. Get it? Guess which direction the Boston Marathon point-to-point course runs? Almost directly northeast... for 26.2 miles. Lovely.

The weather is what it is and I try not to worry about those things out of my control. But this storm had everyone spooked. Would it be pouring? Would the headwinds really be 25+ mph? Could it be dangerous? By Sunday night they were predicting that the rain might be down to a drizzle by noon. We might catch a bit of a break.

Race Morning

I awoke at 4:30 (an hour before my alarm) to hear the wind rattling the hotel windows and the rain pelting against the glass. I listened to that for awhile, tried to visualize what the race might look like in those conditions and somehow went back to sleep until the alarm went off. At 6:15 am, as I walked the two blocks to the bus loading area at Boston Common, it did not seem quite as bad as I had envisioned. Granted, I was wearing tights, pants, long sleeve shirt, jacket and a raincoat. As runners boarded the endless line of yellow school busses for the ride out to Hopkinton, the nervous chatter about the weather was at a fever pitch. How bad was the wind? What was the temperature? What are you going to wear? How are you going to adjust your pace due to the weather? Will the

crowds be out if the weather stinks? Will there be a dry place to wait at Hopkinton High School?

The only thing not in doubt was whether we would run. They would bus us out to Hopkinton and, one way or another, we would run until we got back to Boston.

I was able to stake out a 3' x 3' piece of dry ground under a huge tent in the Runners Village in Hopkinton. I relaxed, visited with those packed in around me and watched it rain. An hour before the race, my tent neighbor was talking to his wife on his cell phone. She was watching the weather report back in her hotel in Boston. She relayed that the temperature was already 45 and predicted to be 50 by noon. There would be no harsh wind chill. And there was a good chance the rain would let up. Still windy, but any positive weather news was good. Now we were 30 minutes from having to report to our starting corrals and entire wardrobes were being revised and debated. I stood at the bus where I was to turn in my extra gear staring into the collection of shirts, hats, shorts and gloves in my bag. My gut told me that I was way overdressed. I quickly stripped off everything but my long sleeve shirt and singlet. I fished my gloves and shorts out of the bag and stuffed my tights and jacket back in. Changed into dry shoes and started the $\frac{3}{4}$ mile walk to the start. Turns out I made the correct wardrobe guess.

Houston, We Have A Problem

With 15 minutes to go I was positioned right in the middle of the 6th corral. That corral contains bib numbers 6,000 – 6,999. The 1,000 runners around me had all qualified within about five minutes of each other. Now that I was stripped down to race gear I was beginning to shiver but figured part of it was nerves and that I would warm up as soon as we started running. I turned on my Garmin GPS watch. The Garmin had been my training and racing guide all year. I would set the average pace monitor and make sure I did not stray too far below or above my goal pace. It failed to properly power up. It locked up on the start up screen and nothing worked! I pushed every button. Several times. Nothing. Tried to turn it off and start over. Nothing. OK, no panic. We will go old school and just run until we get back to Boston. No watch, no pace checking, no splits, nothing. I had done enough marathon pace training that I felt reasonably comfortable that I could pull it off. I would try to focus on my effort level and my form. My unspoken goal, if all went well, was to qualify (3:20) again for Boston...at Boston. Factoring in the weather and now being watch-less, all bets were off.

We Are Running Boston!

The whole Garmin episode took about 5 minutes. Just about the time I let that issue go and relaxed... we were moving towards the start. I crossed the timing mat about 3 minutes 50 seconds after the start. I would be able to get a rough idea of my pace if my math skills held up.

The race starts in a small town on a narrow two lane road. 20,000+ runners pouring down this little road is quite a sight. We were shoulder to shoulder for the first 4 miles but we actually got up to race pace rather quickly. I am sure it has something to do with those seeded corrals at the start. After 111 years the B.A.A has this thing figured out. I saw a kid holding a sign that read "*You are running the Boston Marathon!!*" Wow... after all of the training, the travel, the excitement, the weather related stress... I was running the Boston Marathon! Very cool.

There is lots of excitement those first few miles. Kids slapping high five, runners shouting and chatting, layers of clothing being peeled off, runners dashing into the woods for bathroom breaks. We were at the 5k and then the 10k mark before I knew it. And both splits told me I was fairly close to goal pace. That was welcome feedback. The rain was now a light drizzle but I never really worried about it. The wind was blowing but the pack was still crowded enough that finding a draft was easy. The ten mile mark also came quickly. The pace still felt easy as it is supposed to at mile 10 in a marathon.

The Girls of Wellesley

You can hear it starting to build at about the 12.5 mile mark. It sounds like you are about to enter a packed football stadium. The women of Wellesley College have a long tradition of being the loudest spot on the race course. For a ¼ mile there is a solid tunnel of noise as the girls scream and cheer non-stop. It is a tremendous boost just before the halfway mark. I still felt really good at the half marathon mark. I was aware that family and friends were getting my 5k splits online and was glad they knew I was on track. I also was aware that I would have to explain what happened if it all fell apart over the next two hours. I knew we had 4 miles before the hills began. Thirty minutes until I faced the real test of running Boston. Had I gone out on pace, but conservatively enough to manage the hills? How bad were they going to be? Was “Heartbreak Hill” all that I had imagined? Was it my day? I tried to focus and relax over those next few miles.

Welcome To Newton

The notorious hills of Newton are actually four climbs spread out from 16.5 miles to the 21 mile mark. They are separated by quad pounding descents. The fourth and final climb is the infamous “Heartbreak Hill”. I was getting ready for the hills as we entered Newton when I was surprised by a steep downhill into town. This downhill got the attention of my quads and I realized this was not going to be a cakewalk. Soon after the downhill you start the first climb. About halfway up my hamstrings started to protest. I felt the first twitch of a cramp. “*Focus, Relax, Perfect Form, No Cramps*”. As I went over the top of the hill and started the next descent the twitching switched again from hamstrings to quads as the downhill pounding resumed. On the next hill, as the pain switched again to my hamstrings I knew (from experience) that any misstep, change in form, attempt to relieve the twitch would result in a full out cramp and my hamstring would roll up my leg like a window shade. “*Focus, Relax, Perfect Form, No Cramps*”. On hill three my hamstrings were hurting but better. And somehow, based on my fuzzy math skills, I had managed to stay close to goal pace. I decided that my legs were hurting because I was still running hard, not because I was falling apart. My logic was becoming as fuzzy as my math but it was working for me at the time.

Heartbreak Hill

Hill # 4. I had read about it and heard the stories. Heartbreak Hill. The name explains it all. It is not overly steep. But it is a long gradual climb that comes at the worst time. Right after 3 good climbs and descents, at the 20.5 mile mark of a marathon. The crowds were thick and boisterous. A great energy. I actually felt pretty good and tried to push as much as I could. “*Focus, Relax, Perfect Form, No Cramps*”. There were many people reduced to walking at this point so that made me feel as if I was running even faster! I remember having a conscious thought at the top of Heartbreak of all of the great runners

that had made it over that hill and it was a wonderful moment. As you crest the hill you see the 21 mile marker. A beautiful sight.

It Isn't Over Yet

The top of Heartbreak Hill is also a dangerous place. You have scaled the biggest physical and mental barriers of the race. You see the 21 mile mark. You get your first glimpse of the Boston skyline. It is easy to think you are home free. Heartbreak is followed by a long downhill that goes through the Boston College campus. It is a loud and rowdy crowd. That helps. But at this point another quad pounding downhill is not so good. And it can be easy to forget that there are 5 more miles to run. I had been warned that more runners blow it here than in the hills. I was feeling good. Still on pace. I decided I would run steady until 23. If I was still on pace I would let it all hang out over the last 3 miles.

Time To Go

I was hurting by 23. My legs were very heavy. I saw my time at Mile 23. My very fuzzy math skills told me that I was still close to being on pace, give or take a minute. I couldn't remember if I needed to add or subtract! It was time to let it all out. I would take my best shot at breaking 3:20. The weather had cooperated. I had no blisters or pains other than the expected leg fatigue and no stomach issues. I felt like I was really flying but in reality that was the exertion needed just to stay on pace. It was a grand feeling to still be running hard in the last miles at Boston

The huge Citgo billboard that is situated at the 25 mile mark can be seen for several miles before you get to it. Before I knew it I was right underneath the sign with Fenway Park to my right and a huge cheering crowd. One mile to go.

I was running on the edge. Hamstrings and quads were twitching. A right turn onto Hereford and you see the Convention Center straight ahead. Alright! Two quick blocks and you turn left into the greatest arena in marathoning. Boylston Street. Crowds were deep on both sides of the road. And 600 yards away is the Boston Marathon finish line. I had read about and watched the past champions who had made that turn and experienced the rush of running down Boylston. I thought of all of my running partners who had tried to tell me how amazing this stretch would be. And now it was my turn. And they were right. I was even able to spot Karen a few hundreds yards before the end. As I crossed the line I failed to notice the clock. It would not have mattered because I could not have done the basic math required to figure my finish time. I was just overjoyed that I had finished Boston and given it my best shot. I felt I was close to my goal and could not have gone any faster.

It Is Good To Be Done

As soon as I stopped running my legs were cement. I hobbled through the huge finish area that stretches for 4 city blocks. Each block is assigned a job. As you walk along volunteers hand you water, put a mylar blanket around you, remove your timing chip, hand you a bag of food and place that beautiful finishers medal around your neck. As I limped and staggered along and began to shiver from the cold I can honestly say I had never felt better. At the end of the line were the busses that brought the gear bags back from the start. I retrieved my bag and got dressed and exited the finisher's area. I made

the one block walk back to my hotel where I would meet Karen. 20 minutes after I finished I realized I still did not know my exact time. I had an ideal day and was completely satisfied. But I was now getting curious. Was I able to stay close to 3:20? Was there a chance I re-qualified for Boston on a day that started out so dreary and uncertain?

I finally found Karen in front of the hotel and she had a big smile and said something about "I can't believe it!"

She showed me the text message on her phone... "3:19:45".

Are you kidding me?? The whole experience was now complete. My first Boston Marathon went better than I could have hoped for. I could not wipe the smile from my face for several days. After a hot shower and a big bowl of clam chowder I went back out and walked back to the finish to soak it all up for just a little longer. Boston is a special place.

I wonder what the long range weather forecast is for next year?

Kevin